

Pelican Island

Gunnison Gives Thousands of Birds Start in Life



Two pelicans (top right) fly from Great Salt Lake marshes, where they have been feeding, to a nesting colony (above) on remote Gunnison Island.

Silence of Sanctuary Deafened Biologists

By Tom Wharton
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Few know more about the splendid isolation of Gunnison Island than wildlife biologists Fritz Knopf and Val Bachman. They spent the summers of 1973 and '74 on the island to determine its value to nesting American white pelicans. Largely as a result of their findings, the state acquired the island as a bird sanctuary.

Knopf and Bachman used a crumbling cabin as the base camp for their research. The little dwelling was built in the 1890s by pioneers who scooped up bird feces for mainland farmers to use as fertilizer.

The biologists saw only one other human being during their time on the island — a helicopter pilot forced to make an emergency landing.

At night, they listened to radio mystery theater, ate canned food and tried to sleep while kangaroo rats and small mice scurried across their sleeping bags.

"Early in the year, before the gulls are actively nesting, the island is one of the most quiet places in the world," says Bachman, who is now superintendent of Ogden Bay Waterfowl Management Area.

Knopf loved the solitude. He still cares for a fragile prickly

pear cactus taken from the island.

"There was an aura of the overwhelming beauty of the natural world," says Knopf, the leader of Avian Studies for the National Ecology Center in Fort Collins, Colo. "The sunsets are so spectacular. You had 15,000 gulls screaming all night. The noise was constant. It was a cacophony. It was the closest thing to a wilderness experience I've ever had and we were only 80 miles from Salt Lake City."

The biologists counted and recorded more than 200 species, including many never identified in Utah.

Because the lake was low in the early 1970s, the salt content of its northern arm was extremely high. It was so high, in fact, that both men had to sit at the back of the boat to keep its prop from floating out of the buoyant water.

But they did make forays into civilization.

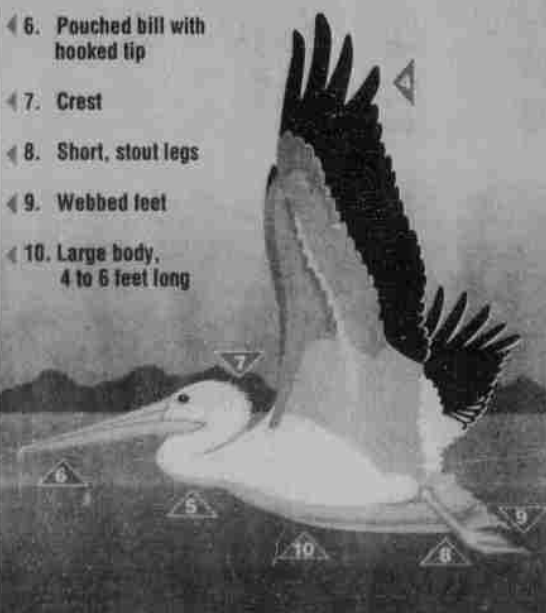
"After we'd been out there for 10 days, we would usually come back and stop at the first hamburger joint we saw. When we rolled down the window, the traffic noise was deafening. We would hear honking, running engines and people yelling. It was the first time in my life I noticed how noisy a city really is."

A YEAR WITH THE



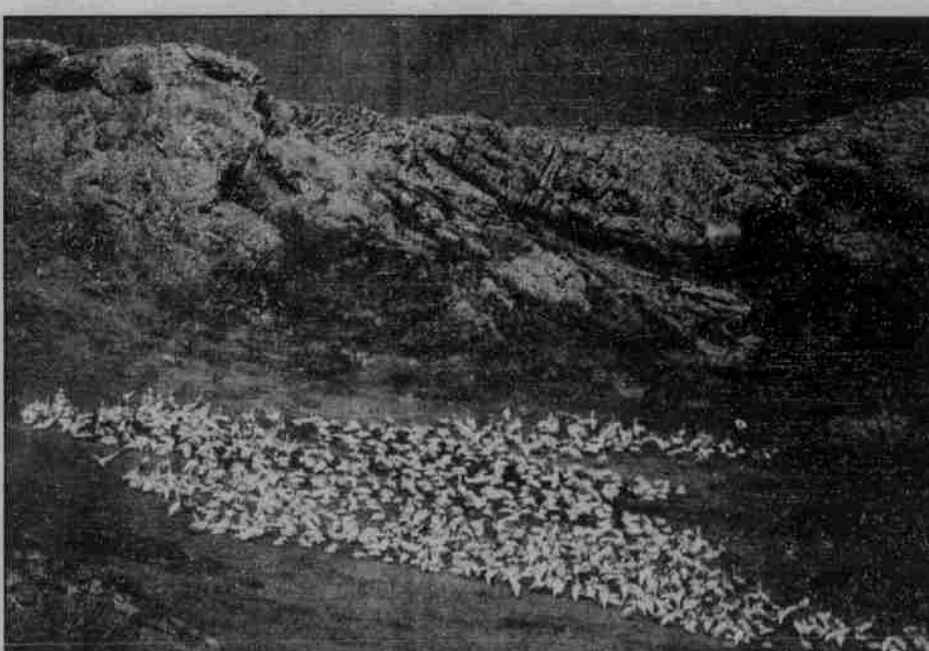
AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN

1. Related to cormorants, tropic-birds, gannets, trigate birds, anhingas and boobies
2. 1 of 2 Pelican species in North America, 1 of 3 worldwide
3. Range: Breeds in scattered colonies of interior lakes of the Northwest and Midwest and western Canada; winters from southern California down the Mexican coast to Nicaragua
4. Wingspread is 6.5 to 9.5 feet (bald eagle is 6 to 7.5 feet)
5. Long neck is perched heron-style in flight
6. Pouched bill with hooked tip
7. Crest
8. Short, stout legs
9. Webbed feet
10. Large body, 4 to 6 feet long



Mark Knudsen / The Salt Lake Tribune

GUNNISON ISLAND



Gunnison Island, located in the Great Salt Lake's isolated northern arm, may seem remote and desolate. But it provides a fine nesting paradise for pelicans.

By Tom Wharton
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Seventeen miles off Promontory Point in the Great Salt Lake, Gunnison Island is now home to some 10,000 American white pelicans and their chicks.

The craggy spit of land teeming with birds gives one the feeling of being on the Galapagos Islands off the Pacific coast of South America, where Charles Darwin developed the theory of evolution. Gunnison is a perfect nesting ground for pelicans because it is uninhabited by people and there are no natural predators — except seagulls, which occasionally swipe eggs from unguarded nests.

But the briny waters yield no food for pelicans and their chicks. The ungainly birds must fly from 30-75 miles to pluck carp from the Great Salt Lake's freshwater marshes and the shallow waters of Utah Lake.

"That seems like a long distance to us," says Division of Wildlife Resources' biologist Pat White. "But they're birds. Flying to Utah Lake for them might be like a drive to the corner grocery store for us."

Quiet and dignified, the pelicans occupy the sandy heart of the 155-acre island while some 15,000 screaming gulls nest on rocky outcroppings near the salty shore.

During the breeding and nesting season — from mid-April to mid-July — the pelicans sport a small growth in the middle of their bills. Biologists aren't certain what purpose it serves. The growth falls off at the end of the nesting season, just like a deer sheds its antlers.

Pelicans usually lay two eggs each season. The chick that hatches first gets the most food and becomes larger than the second. In lean years, only the first bird lives.

Each parent spends 72 hours on the nest, then 72 hours feeding. Adults returning from the marshes with food land in a mass of gaping mouths. They ignore other offspring begging for food and find their own.

As soon as the chicks are able to walk they form pods of 35 to several hundred birds, staying together for their time on the island. They're ready for flight by the end of July. And like their parents, they will winter anywhere from California to Nicaragua.

Gunnison and another Great Basin island — Anaho on Nevada's Pyramid Lake — are the world's most important white pelican rookeries. About one-tenth of the world population — between 10,000 and 17,000 American white pelicans — come to Gunnison each spring.

Other colonial nesting birds such as egrets, cormorants, terns, ibis and herons once joined the gulls and the pelicans on Gunnison Island. But those species have found the man-made marshes on the east side of the Great Salt Lake more to their liking.

That leaves Gunnison Island — first named Pelican Island — as a lonely outpost for gulls and pelicans. The island is now named after Lt. S.W. Gunnison, who was the topographical engineer when Capt. Howard Stansbury surveyed the Great Salt Lake in 1850.

The lucky few people who visit the island feel as if they're on sacred ground. They marvel at scores of pelicans flying just above the chalky green waters in a near perfect "V" formation. Whispering as if they are in church, they savor each moment of the nesting ritual as old as the lake itself.

Says birder Ella Sorensen: "It's exciting to see such a large percentage of the world's breeding population in one place. It's incredible."

Photos By Al Hartmann/The Salt Lake Tribune



Park City Ski Instructor Magic Seghatoleslami, left, and Ali Reza push to 18,400-foot Iran peak.

Park City Ski Instructor Bikes to Top of Iran

By Craig Hansell
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Magic Seghatoleslami has spent the last dozen winters as a Park City instructor.

But, last September, he did something different. He climbed and bicycled to the highest point in Iran with brothers Akbar and Ali Reza.

Seghatoleslami began his adventure with an 18-day bicycling trip from Miami to Washington, D.C. He then flew to Vienna, Austria, where he started a 3,300 mile bicycle trip through Italy, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey and finally to Iran.

He spent five nights in motels and 14 nights camping along the way. The other 24 nights were spent enjoying the hospitality of those who opened their homes.

In Iran, he joined with the Reza



brothers and two porters with four mules for the attempt on Mount Damavand.

Damavand is almost 18,400 feet high. It is a dormant volcano in the Alborz Mountains between Tehran and the Caspian Sea. While the mountain's north face is glacier covered, the conical peak's south side is less steep with slopes of 30 degrees to 40 degrees. As a reference, Alf's High Rustler ski run at Alta has a slope of about 40 degrees.

The village of Rayneh at an elevation of 7,500 feet in the foothills of the mountain served as a base camp. From there, a mid-camp was established at 14,200

feet. The trip started on Sept. 10 at 4 a.m.

After riding for one hour and carrying their bikes for four hours, they arrived at the mid-camp. At 3 a.m. Sept. 11, Ali Reza and Seghatoleslami got on their bikes for the summit push. Akbar Reza led the two porters. By the time they reached 16,500 feet, the slope became too steep for much riding.

During the seven-hour push to the summit, the pair were only able to ride one hour.

By 10:30 a.m. Sept. 11 they made the summit and established what they believe is an altitude record for mountain bikers.

During the entire trip, including the U.S. and European legs of the trip, Seghatoleslami had only one flat tire.